

## **Governor's fire fee plan questioned**

By George Watson, Staff Writer  
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Local leaders' responses ranged from opposition to cautious optimism over Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's plan to levy a fire fee to pay for protecting homes in fire-prone areas. As he announced his plan for severe budget cuts, Schwarzenegger on Thursday proposed a 1.25 percent surcharge on all property owners statewide. The surcharge will cost property owners \$10 to \$12 a year, the governor stated in a news release.

After battling a slew of wildfires in October in Southern California for a second time in four years, fire officials throughout the state have in recent weeks questioned their ability to protect residents who choose to live in fire-prone areas, such as the San Bernardino Mountains.

Because of the firestorms' destructive ways, the proposition has become extremely expensive: Taxpayers picked up a \$291 million bill from the October fires.

State Republican leaders expressed opposition to the fee to fund the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's budget, calling it a new tax in disguise.

"You don't levy fees, you levy taxes," said Assemblyman Anthony Adams, R-Hesperia. "To hide behind the semantics of the English language and propose a so-called 'fee' is disingenuous."

State Sen. Bob Dutton, R-Rancho Cucamonga, offered similar reservations.

"On the surface, I have some real concerns," Dutton said of the Republican governor's proposal. "I am not sure how you make a nexus from someone who lives in Redlands or Riverside, attaching a fee or surcharge for someone living in a high-risk fire area."

But Dutton said he appreciated that Schwarzenegger was investigating different funding mechanisms for a budget that he has been raising concerns about since last summer.

"I am willing to look at it but I don't see how it's feasible or fair," Dutton said.

Dennis Hansberger, a San Bernardino County supervisor, said he was intrigued with the idea, but he had not yet seen specifics about the proposal.

"We'd like to see some enhancement of the fire protection in the state," said Hansberger, whose 3rd District encompasses mountain areas, some of which the state's firefighting force is responsible for. "All in all, I'm pleased that it's an issue that he is addressing."

He added that it's "a fair question" to ask why people not living in high-risk fire zones should pay for people to live there.

But, Hansberger noted, there are lots of examples of services that people pay for and don't receive any benefit.

As part of Schwarzenegger's plan, the proposal includes:

Increasing the number of firefighters serving in heightened danger times on CDF engines from three to four.

Lending more than 100 new fire engines to local fire departments over the next four years.

Buying 11 new helicopters for CDF and providing two more to the California National Guard.

Adams believes the state legislative counsel will get involved to determine whether the proposal is a fee or a tax. That decision will likely determine the proposal's fate, he said.

"If in fact Schwarzenegger can weasel out a so-called fee, then he doesn't need the Republicans to pass it," Adams said. "A fee can be assessed to whomever with a simple majority, but a tax requires a two-thirds vote. Republicans would not support it."

## CLOSING STATE PARKS

The governor proposes closing 48 state parks.

## SLASHING EDUCATION

The budget would cut an estimated \$4.4billion from education programs and suspend the voter-approved Proposition 98 funding guarantee. Cuts to funds for the University of California and California State University systems are expected to result in student fee increases.

## BOOSTING VEHICLE FEES

The plan also includes a proposal to raise the annual vehicle registration fee \$11 to help fund the California Highway Patrol. It would also impose penalties for late payments and is expected to raise \$385million in 2008-2009.

## RELEASING INMATES

At least 22,000 state prisoners would be released early, possibly as soon as this summer. The releases would require legislative approval and would not include anyone convicted of serious, violent or sex crimes.

